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SUBJECT: LOW EXPECTATIONS IN ADVANCE OF FICO-BAJNAI BILATERAL

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REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

1.(C) Introduction and Summary. Expectations for the September 10 meeting between Prime Minister Fico and his Hungarian counterpart are justifiably low. What the two leaders can achieve -- beyond salvaging battered reputations (particularly among fellow EU members) -- is an open question. In a September 2 article in the Slovak daily SME, PM Bajnai stated that he would like to intensify government-to-government cooperation on a range of practical issues: infrastructure connecting the two counties, the problems of Roma and energy. He urges the creation of a non-governmental commission of respected Slovaks and Hungarians. While GOS officials speak about the same sort of "practical" cooperation, they reacted mainly to Bajnai's criticism of the Slovak language amendment and the participation of the Slovak National Party (which Bajnai likened to Jobbik) in the Slovak Government. PM Fico archly noted in a subsequent radio interview that, were it not for the presence of the SNS in the government, Slovakia would not have been able to withstand the pressure to which it has been subjected by Budapest.

12. (C) On this side of the Danube nationalist rhetoric and policy, e.g., the language law, the propagation of myths about "Old Slovaks," and a new-found enthusiasm for flag and anthem are key features not of the Slovak National Party's platform, but that of the Prime Minister's Smer party. Given that fact, and the prevailing view here that Hungarian officials behave arrogantly toward Slovakia, it's unlikely that Fico will approach this meeting with an eye to genuine rapprochement. That said, we sense that in this election season, the unwelcome international spotlight on the language amendment and the reactions among EU partners to the decision to declare President Solyom unwelcome has unnerved at least some in the GOS in a way that earlier dust-ups have not.

13. (C) From Embassy Budapest's perspective, PM Bajnai seems sincere in his desire to decrease tension but is also limited in his maneuvering. His attendance at the September 4 Slovak Armed Forces Day event, along with an unusually large turnout of senior Hungarian officials, was clearly meant to convey an outstretched hand. But the highly emotional nature of the issues in dispute means he must achieve some measure of success in moderating Slovak positions or risk a deadly public perception that he's incapable of protecting Hungarian interests. While committed to the upcoming meeting, Bajnai expressed concern to our Charge in Budapest that Fico is less than sincere in his desire for a successful outcome. On the flip side, however, the Slovak Ambassador in Budapest told us that Fico was blindsided by Bajnai's Sme article over the weekend, which he claims has not helped to create a positive environment for the talks.

¶4. (C) We will continue to encourage open lines of communication, practical partnership on common concerns, e.g., the condition of Roma, and support for a bigger role for civil society in promoting responsible dialogue. Embassies Bratislava and Budapest agree we should avoid being drawn into this complex and neuralgic relationship, but also should be prepared for even chillier relations in the run-up to the respective elections. Even after the campaign rhetoric fades it will take a long time for Slovak-Hungarian relations to normalize. End Introduction and Summary.

Plus ca Change

¶5. (C) The negative interplay amongst the main protagonists in the Slovak-Hungarian drama has varied little in the past few years, even as the players themselves have changed. A few months ago, there were signs that the new pairing of Foreign Ministers Lajcak and Balasz might be more complementary than that of former ministers Kubis and Goncz. Their first meeting was marked by mutual pledges to focus on pragmatic dialogue, and statements to the press about a "new chapter" in the relationship.

¶6. (C) Fast forward a few months. The new Special Advisor for Slovak-Hungarian relations, Juraj Migas (until recently the Slovak Ambassador to Budapest), complained to us just as bitterly as had Kubis about the alleged Hungarian penchant for

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making "unreasonable" demands and for repeatedly sandbagging the Slovaks in front of the media. Migas recounted how the Hungarian side, only minutes before a press conference between then-PM Gyurscany and PM Fico, handed over a copy of Gyurscany's so-called "six points," requests that he then proceeded to enumerate at the press conference. The Slovaks, particularly Fico, felt blindsided, even betrayed.

¶7. (C) Migas detailed the myriad attempts, including by PM Fico, FM Lajcak and President Gasparovic to turn off the "private visit" of President Solyom to Komarno for the unveiling of a statue of St. Stephen. Migas's account acknowledged the Hungarians had notified the Slovaks of a potential Solyom visit, at least verbally, some time ago. We inferred from his comments that information may have fallen through the cracks during the somnolent summer months, but that when the formal notice came in mid-August, alarm bells went off on in high political, if not diplomatic circles. (Comment: Solyom had infuriated Fico by making a similar private visit to Komarno in late 2007, during which he referred to Slovakia as "Felvidek," or the "up-country." There was no way that Fico was going to permit a Komarno redux in 2009.)

¶8. (C) The end result of this latest episode is that the level of mistrust and antipathy toward Hungarian officialdom, including among the diplomats, is higher than ever. During a two-hour discussion which never strayed from the topic of Slovak-Hungarian relations, Migas became quite exercised as he described a litany of perceived slights and injustices. And, as ex-Foreign Minister Demes told us September 7, Lajcak has found himself back in the kind of ethnic politics he thought he had left behind in Bosnia, and he's not happy about it.

¶9. (C) In a summary of FM Lajcak's August 21 briefing to the diplomatic corps, the MFA defended its decision to ban Solyom with the following arguments: "the President is an active part of the international defamation campaign against Slovakia~" and the "Hungarian side refuses to have bilateral dialogue with Slovakia." Furthermore, Solyom "ignored the sensitive date of August 21: the anniversary of the invasion and occupation of the then-Czechoslovakia by Soviet and other troops including the Hungarian army." (Comment: as one Slovak commentator wryly noted, perhaps a more "insensitive" coincidence was the presence of a large delegation from the Russian Interior Ministry -- in uniform -- at the celebration of Slovakia's recent Constitution Day. End Comment.)

¶10. (C) We met with the MFA's action officer for Hungary after the announcement of the September 10 Fico-Bajnai meeting. His comments reinforce the perception that the upcoming meeting will have little salutary effect on bilateral relations. At this point, diplomats feel increasingly trapped by a dynamic which they neither desire nor control. Our contact acknowledged with resignation that the upcoming election seasons would exacerbate strained relations further.

¶11. (C) The run-up to the Bajnai-Fico meeting has been as fraught as the relationship: although each side states it wants an open and constructive dialogue, perceptions of what that entails differ widely. The Slovaks believe that raising issues like the language law in institutions such as the European Parliament, the OSCE and the COE is tantamount to an "international defamation campaign," and that Hungarian attempts to engage on such issues, even on a bilateral level, constitute interference in Slovakia's internal affairs. Public comments from both sides designed perhaps to placate internal critics, e.g., Bajnai's erroneous assertion that ethnic Hungarians in Slovakia will face fines for worshipping in their mother tongue and Fico's denigration of St. Stephen ("let nobody pretend that Stephen is some kind of Slovak king; we have our Svatopluk"), further sour the atmosphere. In this context, virtually no one has high hopes for the premiers' meeting.

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Comment and Conclusion

¶12. (C) Simply put: it is not in this government's perceived interest to improve relations with Hungary or with the Hungarian minority in Slovakia. No meeting will change that. Seen in the most sympathetic light, a nationalist- oriented government has decided -- perhaps partly in reaction to a long history of oppression -- that it is time to put the "state forming nation" on a pedestal. A new version of history, Slovak (only) heroes and fealty to Slovak (only) symbols are seen as a way to win votes and perhaps, as well, to frame the impressive achievements of Slovakia's recent past, as distinctly "Slovak."

¶13. (C) While pride in these achievements (NATO and EU membership, Eurozone entry) is justified, the cynicism and silliness of PM Fico's claim that the language law was a response to the "winds of irredentism blowing across the Danube," or Slota's recent warning that Hungary is attempting to provoke armed conflict, are clear. This sort of rhetoric and the attempt to raise one group (the state-forming nation) at the expense of another for electoral purposes is undermining relations among citizens and distracting from Slovakia's real challenges (an unstated goal of the strategy).

¶14. (C) As one prominent ethnic Hungarian told us: "the mood within the Hungarian community is really becoming more and more `radical.' Everyone, even the most pro-Slovak Hungarian intellectuals are simply fed up with the all of the anti-Hungarian program which is pouring out of some corners of the governing coalition." The irony, of course, would be if the drumbeat of negative rhetoric toward Slovakia's Hungarian minority put the wind in the sails of those relative few who do talk about and long for, at least some sort of "autonomy." From our standpoint, it's just a matter of time.

¶15. (C) Embassies Bratislava and Budapest urge an even-handed USG approach that avoids taking sides and continues to encourage the parties to address seriously the problems in the relationship. In light of the rise in extremist activity and rhetoric, it is essential that Slovak and Hungarian leaders make a genuine effort to calm the waters. Given Slovak politicians' expressed concerns about the ramifications of a FIDESZ victory in 2010, they may be receptive to messages that working constructively with the Bajnai government may provide the best near-term opportunity to move the bilateral relationship forward. We will monitor closely the implementation of the new language law, and continue to stress the importance of tolerance and respect for minorities. There are many Slovaks and ethnic Hungarians who support this agenda; however, they are often drowned out by the likes of Jan Slota and Robert Fico. In this election year, the quieter voices of reason stand little chance.

¶16. (U) This report was coordinated with Embassy Budapest.
EDDINS